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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes what is known about developing desired educational outcomes and anticipated time frames in specialized programs for students who are gifted. Learner outcomes are defined and characteristics of appropriate ones outlined. Next, the importance of identifying specific learner goals and outcome indicators is explained with emphasis on their value for both the learner and teacher. Learner outcomes for gifted students are then differentiated from more generic outcomes developed for all learners. The importance of developing assessment procedures consistent with the learner outcomes is stressed. The teacher's role in regard to learner outcomes is explained in the context of the curriculum alignment process and alignment with standard state learner outcomes. Finally, 13 specific suggestions for creating more appropriate learner outcomes for gifted students are offered. Six suggestions for further reading are listed. (DB)

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# Developing Learner Outcomes for Gifted Students

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*What new skills will I master during this next school year? What new knowledge will I gain about an area I am interested in? How will I become more effective in working with my classmates? How will I improve my work habits?*

These are the legitimate questions asked by gifted students about their own anticipation for school learning, and they nicely frame the basic questions that educators must answer to create appropriate outcomes for such students. If gifted students are to thrive, there must be in place a coherent curriculum structure that defines for teachers, administrators, parents, and the students themselves the goals and purposes of a specialized program, the specific outcomes anticipated, and a prescribed time frame for learning.

## Learner Outcomes

Learner outcomes specify student behaviors we want at a particular developmental point. These outcomes provide the basis for creating worthwhile learning experiences, for setting appropriate expectations, and for assessing the extent of learning attained. We may want gifted third-grade students to prepare a science project using a scientific process—selecting a topic of interest, reading a lot about the topic, designing an experiment to test a question of interest, completing the experiment, and communicating the results through a poster and oral presentation. We may want gifted ninth-grade students to conduct a community survey, using basic statistics, on a topic of interest. These are examples of gifted learner outcomes. They each are (1) appropriately challenging for gifted students at the requisite stage of development, (2) linked to a specific area of study within the regular school curriculum, (3) substantive and worthy of substantial instructional time and student independent time, and (4) assessable through authentic approaches.

## Need for Learner Outcomes for Gifted Students

First, every learner needs goals for learning and indicators of progress in learning. Without a clear understanding of what is to be learned and how that learning is taking place, the learner loses interest, motivation, and comes to see learning as a process devised by others that is trivial, irrelevant, and a waste of time. Thus, the first reason for stating learner outcomes is to respond to learner needs for making sense of the tasks presented. Second, gifted learner outcomes provide a clear differentiation of what the students can learn within a given period of time. Since the characteristics of gifted learners imply a capacity to learn basic material much faster than other learners and handle more complex and sophisticated material at an earlier stage of development, appropriate learner outcomes must reflect these distinctions. Current state-developed learner outcomes for all students may be well-informed with respect to the state of the art in the specific disciplines of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. However, the characteristics of exceptional learners demand higher expectation levels for performance at every level of schooling. Thus differentiated learner outcomes are necessary in order for gifted students to be appropriately challenged. Finally, teachers of the gifted need guidance in planning daily curriculum experiences. Random activities that offer short term appeal are poor fare for the capacities of gifted students. Activities must be tied to substantive outcomes; they must have a purpose larger than themselves. To facilitate worthwhile learning, teachers must be able to see and understand the relationship between a classroom activity and its related outcome.

## How Learner Outcomes for Gifted Students Differ from Generic Outcomes

Typically, major differences lie in the scope of the outcome, the stage of development at which it is expected, and the implicit proficiencies necessary to achieve it at an exemplary level. Below is a set of ninth-grade English curriculum outcomes for all learners juxtaposed with outcomes that were developed specifically for gifted students at that same grade level.

*Generic*

1a. Comprehends a variety of materials.
2a. Is familiar with the structural elements of literature.
3a. Develops an understanding of the chronology of American literature.

*Gifted*

1b. Evaluates diverse materials according to a set of criteria or standards.
2b. Creates a literary work in a self-selected form, using appropriate structural elements.
3b. Analyzes and interprets key social, cultural, and economic ideas as expressed in the literature, art, and music of America at 40-year intervals.

The examples in the gifted set are consistently more challenging, broader in scope, and more focused on specific higher level thinking tasks. They imply that students have mastered the basic underlying skills necessary to undertake required tasks (e.g., that students can basically comprehend what they read), and demand the development of multiple perspectives within and across areas of knowledge. These aspects of differentiation are central in comparing generic and gifted outcome statements.

## Assessment

Just as gifted learners need differentiated outcomes, so too, must the assessment approach be consistent with the stated outcome. This is different from the way the more generic out-



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come for all learners would be measured. The assessment approach should be developed at the same time as the outcome in order to maintain unity of purpose and to ensure that the proposed outcome can in fact be satisfactorily assessed. Incorporating assessment into the teaching-learning process is essential to creating an authentic process. Assessment of outcomes will involve rating student products, whether they are written essays, projects, or original creative work.

## How Teachers Can Work with Learner Outcomes

It is important that teachers see learner outcomes as central to their work in the classroom; that they capture the heart of what students need to learn. For this insight to occur, teachers must have the opportunity to engage in the curriculum alignment process. One approach is for teachers to develop activities that underlie each desired learner outcome. These activities can be developed by teams and discussed with other educators at appropriate times. Another approach to alignment is to develop suboutcomes that will lead to satisfactory performance at the end of the academic year. Again, teacher teams are the best way to accomplish this task, which involves a careful analysis of the learner outcome. A third approach to curriculum alignment is to link outcomes to existing classroom materials. Teachers can review basal texts for lessons that support the desired outcome and then explore supplemental resources that contribute directly to student learning.

## Alignment with State Learner Outcomes

State learner outcomes should be the point of departure for creating differentiated gifted learner outcomes. The example used earlier is one model for representing the relationship between the two sets of learner outcomes. Some generic learner outcomes would not need to be altered or adapted for gifted students. Individual districts would decide which outcomes already meet the criteria of acceptability for the gifted and create new ones only where they are needed. This process of curriculum alignment can be effected for an individual learner as well, thus meeting the needs of special populations of gifted learners who require even more tailoring in their curriculum.

## Suggestions for Creating Appropriate Learner Outcomes for Gifted Students

1. Create a curriculum articulation task force representative of subject areas, grade levels, and a broad cross section of school personnel interested in curriculum.

2. Organize subtask forces to examine state/local learner outcomes by subject area and across K-12 levels. (Vertical planning is essential to the success of this task.)

3. Review existing state or local learner outcomes, using the stated criteria for judging whether they are challenging for gifted learners at the requisite stage of development.

4. Discuss findings with the overall task force. Have each subtask force justify the decisions made regarding adaptations in the generic learner outcomes for gifted students.

5. Review gifted program goals/curriculum goals; align with subject area outcomes.

6. Create additional learner outcomes for gifted students as needed, using the notes and suggestions of the subgroups.

7. Develop analogous assessment protocols for the differentiated outcomes.

8. Align the differentiated learner outcomes for gifted students with existing classroom activities and materials; develop new activities and locate supplementary materials as needed.

9. Hold a staff development session for all teachers on gifted learner outcomes and the linkages already present in the curriculum that address them. Demonstrate activities and materials that specifically teach to the attainment of gifted learner outcomes.

10. Develop an on-going staff development program that assists teachers in facilitating the attainment of the specified learner outcomes.

11. Tailor all teacher evaluation instruments to include an emphasis on using activities and materials shared in staff development sessions that contribute to the attainment of specified learner outcomes.

12. Use annual assessment data to determine needed changes in key aspects of the teaching learning cycle (e.g., better assessment tools, more activities, more targeted materials, insufficient training?)

13. Engage in continued curriculum development tasks such as alignment of activities and materials, creation of curriculum units that fill gaps, and the development of alternative assessment tools and strategies.

## Further Reading


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